

## **A socio-cultural approach in virtual classrooms - key implications for practice for Business Education**

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### **Abstract**

As online classrooms have recently become integral to the teaching of Business Education in the United Kingdom (UK) and as a key challenge here is to use available resources effectively, all business teachers must be proficient in deploying virtual learning. Most international students entering Business Education do not know how to use a virtual learning environment (VLE); many are grappling with the transition to adult life, living alone and away from families. All business teachers are therefore responsible for engaging and involving each of them; by adopting a socio-cultural model in virtual learning classrooms, they can work with students on the gradual development of key business skills and characteristics with potentially broad application.

This article discusses: a socio-cultural approach to the online teaching and learning of Business Education, together with implications for practice; the socio-cultural model proposed by Brenton (2014), with its key elements – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how) and activity (what). This particular model clearly incorporates the social and cultural characteristics of the student in business; it explains to students and develops in them such key business skills as problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, planning and organisation; it encourages in them self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and a sense of responsibility. All of these skills and characteristics enhance employability and pave the way to future success in business enterprise. Understanding what Business Education students each bring to the virtual classroom is therefore essential to the creation of independent learners. The article focuses on the cultivation of collaboration in online classrooms and on developing communities of learning, with ideas for practice; it outlines the role of the lecturer in the virtual classroom, especially in sustaining inclusivity; it concludes by affirming the importance of lecturers' development of a social collaborative process in virtual classrooms, of their establishment of an inclusive online ethos and of their encouragement of skills that enhance employability and lead to success in business too. Many learners with anxiety, shyness and personal barriers to integration with other business students can benefit from the application of a socio-cultural model in VLEs. There are clear implications for all key stakeholders – students, lecturers, policy makers and developers of online classroom technology.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural approach, online classroom, communities of learning, collaboration, business education

## 1.0 Introduction

The use of technology to engage learners in the learning process has gathered momentum over the last few years. In some instances, traditional classroom models are disappearing and are being quickly replaced by the virtual learning environment (VLE) (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Hanna *et.al.*,2000; Palloff and Pratt, 2001). A VLE is a virtual classroom where students and lecturers can communicate with each other and exchange course-related information, assignments and learning material. The Business Education lecturer can communicate with students in real time, using a web camera to deliver group activities and course content effectively. In some Business Education teaching, a combination of face-to-face and virtual classrooms – the ‘blended approach’ to teaching and learning – is being adopted. The core threads of all teaching programmes are employability, ethics, responsibility and global and cultural insights (Butcher, 2014) and the delivery of all business teaching – face-to-face and online – should encompass them. They are woven into all key Business Education subject areas – Business Organisation, People in Business, Marketing, Operations and Production, Finance and Strategic Management. Clear understanding of each of the two mediums of teaching can enable lecturers to deliver effective business teaching in virtual classrooms. Bhandari (2017), in a recent study, emphasises the importance of creating effective teaching environments.

Face-to-face teaching sessions and online ADOBE sessions are contrasting, unique mediums used by all lecturers to deliver teaching in Business Education subjects. Acquiring confidence in using them effectively to create an environment conducive to independent learning is a challenge for all. The ultimate goal of both of them is to encourage learners to be independent, with learners taking sole charge of the process and direction of learning (Balapuni and Aitken, 2012). Engestrom (1999) maintains that the key aspects – learners, others, learning environment, learning activity and the learning outcomes – are vital to the planning of all sessions. All sessions should aim, as Garrison (1997) states, to develop an effective learning environment, with due consideration of self-management and control of the learning task, self-monitoring and responsibility, along with motivation and self-efficacy as factors important to independent learning. For Business Education students, self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and responsibility are all fundamental to both employability and success in business enterprise.

In both types of delivery, the design of the session is an important aspect. According to Brenton (2014), there are five key components to keep in mind when designing any online or face-to-face session – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what). Most sessions are tailored to student needs. Knowing students as active, social, creative learners can aid in planning business sessions well.

## 2.0 The socio-cultural approach and Business Education

The socio-cultural approach to learning focuses on the interaction of socio-cultural environment and learning and, particularly, on how learning is influenced by engagement in socio-cultural activities. This approach maintains that students should be perceived as active learners who develop new social identities through participation in ‘communities of learning’. Business Education students should be given opportunities to engage in collaborative

activities; they should be equipped with tools and concepts for application within communities of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the framework for understanding learning as participation in social practices to develop the concept of communities of practice – in these, people come together to engage in activities where the learning is central to all interaction. Through online virtual classrooms, all Business Education students can develop the important skills of communication, engagement, collaboration and problem-solving.

### **3.0 Business students in a virtual classroom**

On arrival, Business Education students bring with them past experience of teaching and learning, knowledge of concepts and ideas, real-life experience and the particular characteristics of age, gender, sociability, motivation and personal goals. Biggs (1993) discusses the '3P' model – Presage, Process and Product. Many researchers have discussed what a student brings to the classroom – the influence of socio-economic context, expectations of success (Duffy and Jonassen, 1992), ways of thinking (Gardner, 1993), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and teaching in higher education (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2002). All such factors are in constant interaction in the online room and relationships between students are therefore always changing; the lecturer, as facilitator, must manage and shape this state of flux.

As part of the delivery of module content, the lecturer must make sure that students, in the VLE, create meaning and demonstrate understanding of business concepts and ideas and must nurture the process of creating, maintaining and perceiving relationships. Rogoff's (1993) study discusses shared meaning-making and intersubjectivity. It is clear that previous teaching and learning episodes can facilitate joint focus and effective collaboration where learners understand and create meaning together in the VLE.

In online classrooms, awareness of others and their sources of knowledge aids collaboration and enables students to meet the learning outcomes designed for that online session. Garton (2003) argues that 'theory of mind' is important in terms of awareness of another person in the interaction; specific awareness of that person's source of knowledge can also help learners to create relationships in the virtual classroom. As virtual classrooms are heavily reliant on talk and on-screen visuals, some studies, like that by Teasley (1995), explain the importance of talk in problem-solving in teaching and learning.

Furthermore, differences between learners in terms of sociability and language in the online business classroom may be of critical importance in determining whether the session succeeds or not, as may differences in expectations, motivations and attitudes. Bonino and Cattelino (1999) identify the concept of 'cognitive flexibility' in learners. This is the ability to suppress one's response and switch to another response in reaction to an external cue or changes in the environment. In virtual classrooms, cues are from the talk and the visuals presented in the online discussion. Virtual classrooms demand adaptation by and cognitive flexibility in all participants, including the lecturer.

In virtual classrooms, the relationship between the lecturer and the students changes according to the delivery tool. Students in virtual classrooms are unable to make judgements about the competency level, personality or ability of the other learners. It is important to sustain both awareness and acceptance of the fact that each learner brings to the virtual

room clear personal objectives, a social and cultural identity and an individual journey so far. Business students bring real-life experiences of work, leadership and practical understanding of real-life issues, along with course content, all of which constitutes a rich means of creating inter-relationships between these online learners. As many international students opt for a Business Education degree, the range and depth of their cultural and social experiences are respectively diverse and complex.

A competent way to deliver and shape an effective Business Education session is to draw on the cultural and social factors this wide range of students brings to the virtual room, using small-group interaction to build a base for discussion and subsequent development of content knowledge, to lead thereafter to communities of learning. Drawing on examples of practice and details of personal experiences can further enrich such group discussions.

### 3.1 People (who)

Some researchers correlate the successful setting of expectations before the online session with the success of teaching and learning. If lecturers prepare students for what is to be expected online, what to look for in terms of learning outcomes and how to succeed ahead of time, then the chances of effective delivery are high (Cook, 2000; Evans, 2001; Jones and Kelly, 2003).

Online teaching makes it difficult for lecturers to understand fully the specific needs, circumstances and pre-engagement of learners (Coppola *et al.*, 2002). This may be advantageous in that the lecturer must build into the virtual business classroom academic-related information and conceptual clarity, but it may also be difficult to guess at facial expressions or check misunderstandings if learners are minimally engaged. It is therefore extremely important to identify 'the person' in the virtual classroom before key conceptual engagement and delivery.

This can be done effectively in a number of ways – before the start of the session, during it and at its end. Identifying and addressing the group before the online session in emails or face-to-face interaction or on forums can initiate a dialogue about such significant issues as specific personal learning difficulties, threshold concepts and factors affecting the learning process. During the session, there should be at least two or three opportunities for learners to interact in pairs or small groups or add comments to the chat box. Writing on the slides on the virtual white board is one technique that all students enjoy. At the end of each online session, learners should be given time to clarify any doubts and misunderstandings.

Competence in the use of an online tool in a virtual classroom can also be an important factor in achieving understanding of the person. Some Business Education students and lecturers may be very competent with the tools and tasks of the virtual room, while others may be less confident, reserved and shy to engage – in order to avoid errors. Lecturers should endeavour to scaffold the confidence of the learners in each session by maybe giving, at the start, a tour of the room and its specialist function keys. It is advisable to run some trial or pilot sessions for students who are new to virtual learning and so build their confidence. In an online classroom, the lecturer should follow an inclusive approach to learning where there is a variety of ways for students to engage with the topic, offering flexibility to students who have different educational needs, dispositions and tendencies in the way they learn (Brenton, 2014).

To build confidence in Business Education students, lecturers themselves should not have any barriers to their own understanding or use of online tools, but must keep abreast of changes in technology and undertake training for upgraded VLE tools. Many settings offer staff development programmes and encourage the building of lecturer communities of practice. Pairing less competent lecturers with more adept staff in virtual rooms can also aid in building their confidence.

### **3.2 Shared purpose (why)**

As in a face-to-face teaching session, there are ample online opportunities for the teacher and learners to check and align expectations, clarify learning outcomes and clear up misunderstandings (Conaway *et al.*, 2005). The purpose of the online session should be created and maintained by lecturer and students together. Giving students choice in the online session enhances learning and creates the element of 'social presence' that links into the community of learners (Stein and Wandstreet, 2003). Each online session should have clear aims and learning outcomes, which are then aligned to the materials, activities and assessment (Brenton, 2014). All sessions should pivot on SMART learning objectives and the learners should be able to shape and align the objectives and purpose of a session in terms of specific (unique to each learner) and general (specific to the module and curriculum). It is sometimes effective to ask students on the forum and in groups about key concepts and ideas for which they need help and support.

### **3.3 Locating framework and social conditions (where)**

It is extremely important in all online Business Education sessions to locate where the learning activity for that session is placed in terms of the wider module, assessment and other key concepts. It is crucial to identify how that online session advances to the next level the required knowledge and understanding. (Brenton, 2014). Johnson and Johnson (2005) discuss how 'joining together' in the online sessions can create 'swim or sink together' scenarios for the learners, where each learner recognises the value of contributions made by others. In many Business Education subjects that students engage in, these 'swim or sink together' scenarios assume considerable importance and prepare for that integral part of business learning – group work – which moves learners from independence to interdependence in online communities of learning. In real practice, it may be effective to incorporate reflections on teaching and course themes by starting the session with group and individual input on learning so far. It is of benefit if lecturers indicate the themes addressed and where the present learning session fits in with the 'big picture' of the module or content.

### **3.4 Method (how)**

Online teaching sessions should focus on two key aspects in the method of delivery: first, initiative taking and communicating and, second, learning to learn. These two aspects are critical in all Business Education modules. All online sessions should aim for clear communication between the learners, these having been contacted early, before the sessions. Lecturers should take the initiative to make this prior contact with learners, highlighting by means of group or individual contact the shared goals of the session. The lecturer takes on a proactive, supportive and facilitating role (Conaway, Easton and Schmidt, 2005).

The lecturer in the virtual classroom acts as a facilitator of the learning process and has a complex relationship to maintain with all learners. The facilitator should allow the learners to take ownership of their learning process and build new information and meaning through interaction with others. Building trust in the group and creating an encouraging learning environment in the community of learners online constitute the facilitator's key role. For many Business Education lecturers, this could be the application of all teaching, social and business skills learnt throughout their interaction with the learners. Building trust and a level of comfort can further help communication to flow effectively before, during and after the session, to its overall benefit (Hiltz and Turoff, 2002).

For students, an online session should have the inherent goal of making them effective learners and enabling their progress towards realistic personal and group targets. 'Learning to learn', or metacognition, is another important area the virtual learning environment can tap into. Brown (1997) highlights how reflective activities like discussion, questioning, querying and criticism should be incorporated into all teaching. These self-reflective activities are then gradually internalised and help to develop 'communities of learners'. Facilitators should make sure that reflection and self-reflection are incorporated well, into all sessions. There should be enough time and opportunity in each session for these reflective activities. Ability to reflect, weigh options and make changes and decisions are an important part of Business Education learning.

### **3.5 Activity (what)**

The inclusiveness of selected activities and their clear purpose should be kept in focus throughout the online session. The activity selected should be in line with the goal and the wider context of the course delivery. SMART objectives of the session should align with the key goals of the activity. Before the selection of each activity for an online session, the lecturer should consider carefully its purpose and the rationale for its use. The activities selected should not be merely for the sake of engagement but should enable learners to develop deeper understanding of concepts and ideas. In each online session, lecturers should make a clear attempt to include critical analysis and reflection. The activities should be inclusive – encouraging students of all different learning styles to engage – and have multiple prompts and peer feedback; all learners must realise their own personal goals (Brenton, 2014). A wide range of activities should be used: videos, reflective tasks, activities for the building of study skills and critical evaluation of the material, concepts and ideas. Details of the activity and how students will approach it should be considered well before any online session.

Brenton's (2014) five key components – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what) can create an inclusive environment for the teaching of business online. All lecturers who are continuously looking for techniques for including all students and for effectively delivering module outcomes can benefit from applying these five key components to create an inclusive online ethos. Collaboration online can help in overcoming barriers to learning in Business Education.

#### **4.0 Inclusive Collaboration in learning online**

Christiansen and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (1995) state that collaborative learning requires a means and an environment of study, where students should together be able to create joint goals, apply personal motivations and experiences and use dialogue to enquire. Collaborative activities remove a sense of isolation and loneliness in online Business Education sessions. Studies maintain that the greater the involvement of students in the design, assessment, content and evaluation of the learning, the more motivation and responsibility for their learning process they demonstrate. Business Education online lecturers should promote the fair involvement of all learners in the shaping and structuring of all sessions, as well as in the suggesting of ideas for assessment. Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995) discuss the collaborative model in creative thinking online. This kind of collaborative working online helps learners to externalise learning and use their experiences in the learning process. Creative thinking is an important skill that all Business Education learners develop through online teaching.

To create joint goals in an online session, it is important that lecturers negotiate the goals with the learners. Lecturers should set a plan for the session and ask students to give their input about their own expectations and goals, in line with the key group goals. Thus, they may see and understand planning and organisation, with clear goals in action too. After introductions and learning expectations, the session can start with some icebreaker activities. Lecturers should ask the learners to comment on introductions of other learners and meet and greet each learner as s/he enters the virtual room. When forming teams in an online session, it is effective to give the learners choice in forming their groups. Lecturers can help learners in setting a clear directive, with guidelines, about small-group activities.

Brookfield and Perskill (2005) maintain that the collaboration is set to grow effectively if students engage online with each other rather than with the lecturer. The role of the lecturer is therefore as facilitator of this collaborative talk in online classrooms. Since achieving success in collaboration online is an addictive process, students who are successful in collaborating online will enjoy doing it more in future tasks. This in some ways helps students with inhibitions about interaction and communication to work with others. For many students, this reduces the sense of isolation and loneliness in the university.

Promoting feedback to the lecturer and the online community of learners in a virtual classroom is extremely important. Covey (1989) states that developing a way of first understanding and then being understood is important in feedback in virtual classrooms. The feedback has to be deeper than just stating a positive brief comment such as "This is good." If so, it promotes interdependence and a sense of community in collaboration in online sessions. Differences and diversity among the students in the online session should be perceived as appropriate positives rather than deficiencies (Barnett, 2007). These differences should be valuable in further shaping and making the session inclusive.

#### **5.0 Reflections on business teaching practice in an online classroom session**

Creating an environment that makes students independent learners is a continuous and cumulative process for all Business Education lecturers. Reflections on how far the goals of each session were achieved and how far it led to successful completion of individual and group goals are an important method of assessing its success.

There should be an opportunity in the virtual classroom for each learner to rate the effectiveness of the content and process of teaching. The last part of the session should be an open discussion, allowing students to write on the virtual whiteboards their reflections, worries and what they could not achieve. All this then becomes a strong thread for inclusion in forum discussion and later sessions for supporting the learning of content. For the lecturer, the craft of teaching online can be shaped further by building and integrating the reflections and points of improvement into the sessions to follow.

Business Education lecturers should practise what works and make relevant changes in small parts to make sure that all session goals are well achieved. It is sometimes effective, before the real online session takes place, to practise with peers the session and tool use in empty online classrooms. Observations of peers and peer walk-in to the virtual classrooms can further support lecturers in the shaping of an effective teaching and learning process.

## Conclusion

Classrooms online are a reflection of complex socio-cultural factors with impact upon their use and continuing effectiveness for both lecturers and students. Developing a social collaborative process in virtual classrooms, with lecturer as a facilitator, can enable the best use of virtual classroom. Applying the socio-cultural model to online Business Education teaching can help all students to develop some important key skills: problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, planning and organisation. This model further develops self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and responsibility in Business Education students. Business Education lecturers can create an inclusive online teaching and learning environment by applying Benton's (2014) five key components – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what). Understanding and applying knowledge about students to create and maintain an inclusive ethos online can further support students with psychological and personal barriers. Many learners with anxiety, shyness and personal barriers to integration with other business students can benefit from application of the socio-cultural model in virtual learning environments.

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